
GLOBALIZATION, TERROR AND THE SHAMING OF THE NATION

Sasanka Perera

Globalization, Terror and the Shaming of the Nation: Constructing Local Masculinities in a Sri Lankan Village by Jani de Silva. ISBN 141207889-X, 264 pp. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.

Context

Jani de Silva's book is one of the few serious books that attempt to place the period of extreme political violence in Southern Sri Lanka of the 1980s in context. As quite evident from the title, the text is concerned with three interrelated themes: globalization, terror and masculinities. These thematic concerns are interrogated and explored through the careful reading of a specific violent event that unfolded in the Ratnapura district between November 1989 and January 1990 in which 22 students were abducted from their homes by masked gunmen, taken to a nearby army camp, tortured and murdered at the height of the period of terror in southern Sri Lanka that was commonly referred to as *beeshanaya*. This event itself captured much public and media attention at the time and afterwards and it is one of the few cases that ever made it to the courts. A reading of why this event occurred the way in which it did is what the author attempts to achieve through a narrative analytical pathway that takes the reader through issues such as globalization, terror and the construction of masculinities in the local context.

Relevance of Masculinities

Given the fact that the construction of local masculinities is a major preoccupation of the book, let me take a moment to briefly locate this book in the context of ethnographies of South Asia that deals with issues of sexuality and gender. At the level of global academic discourse, the issue of masculinities is no longer a marginal concern. However, as the editors of the 2004 publication, *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity* observe quite correctly, many of the key concepts and theoretical works associated with masculinities have been developed via empirical material specifically located in developed

Anglophone countries. On the other hand, what emerged as gender studies in the South Asia region were often more specifically women's studies that were concerned with issues of female sexuality and related concerns. In this scenario, there was an almost total absence of theorizing the male and masculine on the one hand and serious fieldwork that explored local constructions of masculinities and their global interrelations on the other. So even though South Asia has produced a serious corpus of empirical works on gender and sexuality specifically located in the region, the focus on masculinities as a specific issue within studies of gender is still at a very preliminary stage. At the same time, works on the Indian Hijras such as Serena Nanda's *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) could have opened up more avenues for discussions on masculinities had not some of these texts evaded the issue of masculinity by insisting on presenting an argument for a 'third gender' as pointed out by Caroline and Fillipo Osella and Radhika Chopra in *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity* which they edited. In this regional context, Jani de Silva's book is a pioneering work that explores the processes and dynamics of constructing local masculinities as a central issue while it is the most serious text that I am aware of that deals with this issue in the Sri Lankan context.

Contents of the Book

Let me now proceed to make some preliminary comments on the book itself. In effect, Chapter One sets the tone and marks the points of departure for the overall narrative and reading that would emerge over the remainder of the text. In so doing, she draws the readers' attention to the political context of the event that she would later discuss in detail, the dynamics of the parents' group that was formed consequent to the abduction and killing of the school boys, the failures of rule of law, militarization and rites of shame, the role played by students' politics in constructing masculinities at high school and a number of other important areas which are crucial to a fuller understanding of what happened.

In latter chapters she explores these ideas by both expanding our ethnographic understanding of the event and its socio-political landscape and a robust theoretical discussion in an attempt to unravel some of these issues that are not readily self-evident. In the second chapter de Silva spends considerable time exploring how the global is assimilated by local actors in specific localities and contexts as in the site she has opted to investigate. She attempts to do this by using Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and hybridization. Chapter Three is a more conventional ethnography of the settlement where the events and the incidents she describes took place. She attempts to describe how this specific site or locality came into being in historically recent times through an exploration of its social and political history. As she points out, while a specific local identity was formulated through a number of processes, it was achieved by enforcing certain codes of group solidarity. These historical dynamics too had much to do with what transpired at the height of political violence in the late 1980s. Chapters four to seven are also quite important in ethnographic terms. In chapter four she focuses on the abduction of schoolboys from their high school by providing an extensive background on radical student politics in the context of which the relationship between teachers and students collapsed to a significant extent. That collapse and the process of invalidating student protests by state authorities as 'inappropriate behavior' had much to do with their collective fate as de Silva convincingly argues. Chapter five more specifically explores the manner in which notions and ideals of masculinity are produced in the contexts of both the school and student protest movement that was visibly energetic at the time, mostly through the backing of the JVP.

Chapter Six is a presentation of events from the perspectives of captors and captives. The captors' narratives are drawn from the representations to the Judge of the High Court in Ratanapura made by three captors in their latter incarnation as the 'accused' when the event that de Silva describes actually became a closely monitored moment in recent Sri Lankan judicial history. The narratives of captives are presented on the basis of stories narrated by some captives who survived as well as the stories of parents, siblings and friends of the students who were killed. These narratives are presented by de Silva as 'truth in fable' (186) as "events seen through the eyes of witnesses whose lives were affected and sometimes changed by them" (186). Chapter Seven is also important as it attempts to explore, through the extensive narratives of three young women, why young women did not engage in student activism to the same extent as did young men. De Silva attempts to show how the community decides

what the 'appropriate behavior' for young women would be, and how the community actually controls the sexuality of women by 'sexualizing' what is deemed unacceptable forms of behavior for young women. This process of social control played a crucial role in deviating women from participation in violent politics.

General Comments

One thing I was particularly struck by when reading this text, particularly the more ethnographically inclined chapters, is the 'thickness' of ethnography or the substantial attention given to details of the events, people, places and processes that are described. This clearly emerges from the extensive narratives of the characters that de Silva has met and talked to in the field. Particularly, the narratives of the captives and the three young women in Chapter Seven read like fictional narratives of violence, terror, memory and fear of shame. As such, if the life as a social anthropologist and civil society icon is not lucrative enough, de Silva already has enough material to become a successful novelist. On the other hand, this text is not merely about ethnography. It is one of the most theoretically sophisticated readings of an event that I have read in a long time. I make these two observations on ethnography and theory with reference to two manifestations that I am familiar and concerned with:

- 1) Many allegedly 'anthropological' texts produced in Sri Lanka today, particularly in the Sinhala language are almost completely devoid of theory and theorization while their ethnography is also often shaped and colored by the concerns of the writer rather than privileging the narratives themselves.
- 2) Other 'anthropological' texts on Sri Lanka mostly stand out due to their 'thinness' of ethnography where theory often seem to merely linger on to make a convoluted case for the writer's 'scholarship' in the clear absence of fieldwork or ethnography. In such cases, theory seems to have replaced ethnography out of context.

I would suggest that de Silva's text avoids both these manifestations. Not only is her text replete with detailed ethnographic descriptions, but she seems to have taken great care to present the narratives of the people she has talked to in the tones they have spoken to the extent possible, which brings to mind a similar effort undertaken by James Brow in the 1990s when he wrote his book *Demons and Development: The Struggle for Community in a Sri Lankan Village*. On the other hand, theory in this book is not for the purpose of superficially enhancing the writer's scholarship or

'beautification' of the text, but for unraveling, unlocking and contextualizing some of the events and issues that are discussed.

Concluding Comments

I am quite happy that a local scholar has been able to produce a substantial piece of scholarship as in the case of de Silva's text. This is particularly important when the global academic landscape is littered with what I consider sloppy or inconsequential scholarship on Sri Lanka such as Alex Argenti Pillen's *Masking Terror: How Women Contain Violence in Southern Sri Lanka* that tend to be taken unduly seriously by virtue of their relatively easy access to global

centers of knowledge production and dissemination where decisions to publish or not seem to be taken by individuals with a dubious understanding of Sri Lankan society, culture and politics. Being mindful of this context, I hope de Silva's book will be well received in the country and beyond on the strength of its scholarship. In conclusion, I would articulate one concern that would be considered 'completely politically incorrect' by most accounts. That is, the kind of mind and discipline required to produce this kind of work could have been put to much better use had the author opted to leave the diminished but overrated intellectual environments of Colombo's civil society and located herself in the diminished intellectual environments of the local university system where at least in theory better, more enhanced and worthwhile opportunities are available to engage with young individuals.

Dr. Sasanka Perera teaches Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Colombo.

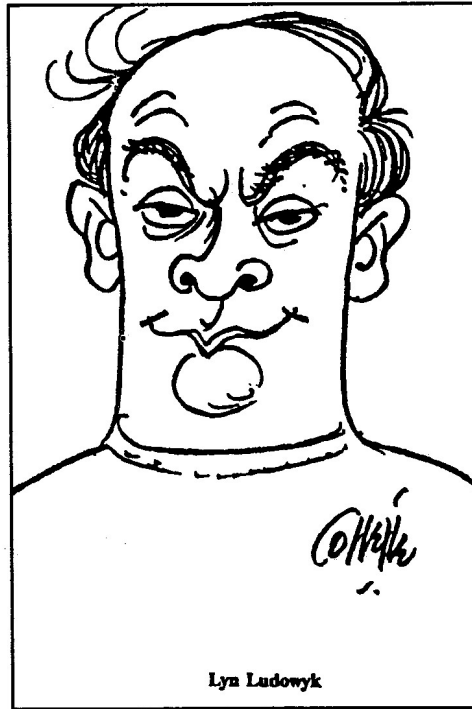
PILL FOR AN ISLAND

I did not visit the Black Pussycat,
the Fat Flounder, or even Macy's
on 34th Street. I left the Black Fence
for another return. I must devote
myself to compressing the city
into a compact, multi-purpose
pill to pop on those occasions
far away on Ceylon's East Coast

Where the blue-green jeweled
sea-turned not brown, in the wake
of the tsunami-witnesses again
patrol boats and small arms fire,
lobbed grenades and thatch explosions,
rapes of social workers and hundreds
upon hundreds upon thousands
in flight from their villages.

War has returned to the hamlets,
coves and palm-fronded taverns,
and in New York those towers
of Ilium vanished, my two islands
united in the global accounting
of war and war's alarms,
everybody bruised, jaded and afraid
waiting for the Messiah or the flames.

Indran Amirthanayagam, August 18, 2006



BIRTH CENTENARY OF E.F.C. LUDOWYK

Born in 1906 on the 16th of October, E.F.C. (Lyn) Ludowyk of Galle did a degree in English in Cambridge. He became a Professor of English at the Ceylon University College and later the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, retiring in 1956. Ashley Halpe has described Ludowyk's contribution to English studies in Sri Lanka – rejecting the old syllabus (with its emphases on Anglo-Saxon and English texts and literary history), and introducing students to 20th century literature and avant-garde literary critics such as F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards. Halpe also refers to the “Ludowyk charisma in the classroom” where he was an inspiring teacher, making an impact with the new ‘practical criticism’ (*The Island*, 14 October 2006). Ludowyk's contribution to revolutionize the English syllabus has been acknowledged by his students – some of whom became distinguished teachers of English – notably R.C.L. (Dicky) Attygalle and Regi Siriwardene—who influencing another generation, based on Ludowyk's teaching.

Other less known facts about E.F.C. Ludowyk are his influence on Ediriweera Sarachchandra who introduced modern trends to the Sinhala theatre, and Ludowyk's links with the Left movement of Sri Lanka. He was close to the L.S.S.P and its leaders, and supported the Left causes of the period. In his politics he worked together with his wife Edith Gyomroi—the distinguished Hungarian psychologist (a refugee from Nazism) who was also a part of the European Left of the 1930s. In Sri Lanka she was not only involved in Marxist politics but also in the autonomous socialist women's group, the Eksath Kantha Peramuna. EFC and Edith Ludowyk are also remembered for their work for the University Dramatic Society. We reproduce Professor Osmund Jayaratne's recollections of this period when English drama flourished in Sri Lanka.